

## One Company, One Language? - An Argument on Strategic Management (Communication)

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### Abstract

*Within the field of strategic management most researchers presume and argue that strategic management is inextricably linked with strategic management communication, where the wishes and goals of the management must be made understandable for those who are expected to attribute and fulfil the goals of a certain company, i.e. the employees. Shared or common language - or as many scholars within the field put it: One company, One Language - and shared or common meaning-making is presumed to be a prerequisite for achieving goals and objectives. According to many scholars within the field of strategic management (communication), without a shared or common language it might have serious consequences for an organisation, perhaps it might even lead to a breakdown of the organisation. This paper argues that it might be dangerous to companies if they entirely are trying to fulfill the demand One Company, One Language.*

**Key words:** strategic management; philosophical linguistics; communication; lifeworld; collective interpretation; one company, one language; social construction; language games; Wittgenstein; management communication

### 1. Introduction and Background

Through the years many studies on communication as a strategic parameter of different companies and organizations have been made. Relatively few of these studies have focused on linguistics – especially not philosophical linguistics. When linguistics have been included there has been a general tendency to deal with an instrumental perspective concerning right or wrong, good or bad. According to this and as an attempt to focus on the philosophical linguistic perspective the main focus in this article is linguistics and the implications of dealing/not-dealing with that perspective in a managerial practice. The above quoted claim of Peter Drucker concerning the relationship between language - language and linguistics are in this article used synonymous - and (strategic) management and his appeal to managers to acquire respect for language is not just an isolated case.

Other scholars but not many have put forward the same claims, i.e. Astley & Zamutto, Roos & Krogh, and this article will hopefully be seen as an additional argument in the on going discussion concerning language and management, as it opposed to most other articles within the field of (strategic) management chiefly focuses on language, which means that other (relevant) issues are less focused here. Another argument for focusing language here is, that the focus on language has only been sporadically approached even if there has been an increasing interest in the study of organizations, management and the linguistic turn. According to most scholars within the field of strategic management it has been assumed and argued that strategic management is inextricably linked with strategic management communication where the wishes, ambitions and goals of the management must be made understandable for those who are expected to attribute and fulfil the goals of a certain company, i.e. the employees, and that the only (and best?) way to run and manage a company or an organization in order to achieve common goals, objectives and common spirit is to do it act in accordance with the general principle One company, one language.

Shared or common language - or as many scholars (i.g. Johnsen 2002) within the field put it: One company, One Language – and shared or common meaning-making is therefore actually presumed to be a prerequisite for achieving goals and objectives. According to many scholars within the field of strategic management (communication), without a shared or common language it might have serious consequences for an organisation, perhaps it might even lead to a breakdown of the organisation. According to many scholars linguistics seems to be pivotal in future studies due to the increasing interest in a socialconstructivist/philosophical linguistic focus. I.e. Roos & Krog have characterized language as the monetary standard dealt with exchanging knowledge. Management needs to develop systematic processes that stimulate languaging throughout the company, so that, over time, an internal lexicon is formed that can provide the foundation for an effective corporate identity.

Rather than simply imposing borrowed words, concepts and phrases on the rest of the organisation, this means spending time and resources discussing new meanings that reflect where the company is today rather than where it was several years ago. // The dynamics of the language which employees use to communicate with each other and with management is a key component in helping the company decide what knowledge is legitimate and what is not as a basis from which to see the future.(Roos & Krogh, 1995). Further more according to Roos & Krogh, it is quite essential to focus on collective meaning-making and interpretation and not as much on the fact who might be right – or wrong - in an organization. (Roos & Krogh,1995). However the focus on linguistics and its role is not limited to Roos & Krogh. Astley & Zamutto (1992) were among the very first to stress a linguistic – and here that means a philosophical linguistic – focus dealing with organizations and management. However their contribution to the management paradigm was somewhat more sophisticated as they related their hypotheses to Wittgenstein – and for that time a new and very different way to consider linguistics dealing with organizations and management. By doing so Astley & Zamutto were among the first to deal with the so-called linguistic turn in organizational studies, anyhow before others did focus on philosophical linguistics in an organizational and managerial context.

They contributed with an article in *Organization Science* (Astley & Zamutto, 1992) in which their point of departure was the late Wittgenstein's theory in which he stated that language is not merely a description of the world, but is our (life)world as it constructs our (life)world. In that sense Astley & Zamutto lean on Wittgenstein and a linguistic philosophical, constructivistic perspective of management. Organization science and managerial practice are semiautonomous domains, each with its own internal dynamics. These dynamics are manifested in what Wittgenstein (1953) termed "language game". According to Wittgenstein, words derive their meaning not from the actions or objects that they denote, but from the historical context of discourse, or language game, in which they are used. The meaning of words is specified by rules and intelligibility embedded in the institutional context in which language is employed. Linguistic interpretations of phenomena and events are always grounded in a prior set of socially defined understandings about the nature of reality. These understandings are conveyed in the stylized vocabularies and protocols of communication that compromise language games. In Wittgenstein's view, our knowledge and comprehension of the world is the product of these linguistic conventions rather than the direct product of empirical observation, since we perceive nothing except through the language structures in which perception is embedded. (*Organization, Science, Managers, and Language Games*" s. 450 (*Organization Science*, november 1992).

Related explicitly to management and the role of management in that perspective, they stated that management must shape conceptions of organizational reality [and] An effective leader's persuasion is of the subtlest kind, for he or she must interpret reality to offer images of the future...(ibid.) and they continued The role of management, consequently, becomes one of using words and ideas to shape conception of organizational reality. Leadership becomes, in effect, a language game (Pondy 1976). As Conger (1991, p 44) argued: it is important that business leaders see their role as "meaning makers". They must pick and choose from the rough materials of reality to construct pictures of great possibilities. An effective leader's persuasion is of the subtlest kind, for he or she must interpret reality to offer images of the future that are irresistably meaningful. In the choice of words, values, and brief chosen, you as a leader "craft" reality to ensure commitment and confidence in the mission. Rhetorical techniques of metaphors, of stories, of repetition and rhythm, and of frames all help to convey ideas in the most powerful ways. They ensure that strategic goals are well understood, that they are convincing, and that they spark excitement. If you as a leader can make an appealing dream seem like tomorrow's reality, your subordinates will freely chose to follow you". (ibid.)

As so Astley & Zamutto (1992) consider managers as meaning makers as they stress that managers by means of choice of words, values etc. must be able to craft reality to ensure commitment from their employees. A few years later Mauws & Philips (1995) commented on Astley & Zamutto's article. Basically Mauws & Philips recognized the importance of dealing with language in relation to the phenomenon of organization, and wrote referring to Astley & Zamutto that they believe that the notion of "language games" is sufficiently valuable to warrant a more comprehensive review. (Mauws & Philips, p. 323, 1995). Nevertheless and recognizing the importance of the work of Astley & Zamutto, they consider Astley & Zamutto's work too narrow, as they state: While Astley and Zamutto (1992) have identified some important dimensions of the "language game" concept, we feel that there are several areas in which they are unclear or imprecise in their presentation. In addition, there are also areas where the ramifications of the "language games" concept are not sufficiently developed(Mauws & Philips, p. 325, 1995) Mauws & Philips stress however that their intention with this article is not to suggest that there is one correct definition of "language games". Nor it is to suggest that there is one correct reading of Wittgenstein's work.

Rather, our intention is to point out that while the term “language game” can be used in many different ways, some understandings of the term are more powerful than others, i.g., like all concepts, the usefulness of the “language game” concept is dependent how it is understood (Mauws & Philips, p. 323, 1995) What is interesting, but not surprising is that Mauws & Philips stay at an academic level discussing language games - maybe because language game is an extremely abstract dimension - even to Wittgenstein himself. But staying at an academic level is in my opinion not sufficient for trying to find out if Wittgenstein is applicable on managerial practice. The point is that no one or very few indeed have tried out empirically if it is right that the only and best way to manage strategically is by practicing One company, one Language? That means to research language (games) as a potential strategic resource. Obviously it is necessary to stress that a common language is of course not sufficient to obtain strategic targets. What is pivotal is, that the sensegiver and sensemaker (Goia & Chitpeddi, 1991) do a common or collective (Dixon, 1999) construction of the world by constructing a common reality in language as Wittgenstein claimed.

As so this article deals with strategic management communication in a social-constructivistic and philosophical linguistic perspective with special reference to Wittgenstein’s theory of construction and language games. As for the social constructivist perspective, the point of departure is Berger & Luckman (1990) whose theories are not very strong concerning linguistics. Because of that it is necessary to supplement with i.e. Roos & Krogh (1995a and b) and Astley & Zamutto (1992). The aim here is to stress how reality only gets sense and meaning through the individual’s understanding and interpretation – that there is no shared or common social reality, but that reality is constructed in different individual variants. Reality is shaped by dialogue and sociality among individuals in shared or common language and culture. Language is as such not only a system of representation, but is defined by doing something and constructing reality. It is on the basis of this understanding as mentioned above that Roos & Krogh stress the role of management as meaning makers, as their role, according to Roos & Krogh, is to develop new concepts and expressions and put sense and meaning into them, so an internal lexicon that can be the basis for an effective corporate identity over time will be constructed.

## **2. Company, Context and Wittgenstein**

Concerning organizations the organizational structure can be considered the frame within rules are set. Concerning language and organization it means according to Wittgenstein as interpreted by Astley & Zamutto that words derive their meaning not from the action or objects that they denote, but from the historical context of discourse, or language game, in which they are used. The meaning of word is specified by rules of intelligibility embedded in the institutional context in which language is employed. Linguistic interpretations of phenomena and events are always grounded in prior sets of socially defined understandings about nature of reality. These understandings are conveyed and stylized vocabularies and protocols of communication that compromise language games. (Astley & Zamutto, p. 444, 1992) Relating that to the Danish philosopher and theologian Svend Andersen (1989) it means The context, in which the words must be seen is to Wittgenstein not only the sentence itself, but with the often quoted expression – a trait in the language game.

The context is the use of a linguistic expression, which as an act has its unified whole. Furthermore in the expression a trait in the language game is implied that the trait itself which of course can be stating a sentence must be seen in a furthermore comprehensive context: the language game. (Andersen, p. 160, 1989 (my translation, JH)) Relating to an organization and its i.e. hierarcial structure as context this means that the strategic linguistic perspective – or the management communication – as top down is merely an ordering language game that orders the employees as both the management and the employees in an hierarcial organizational structure are supposed to know the rule, that the above level always have the right both to determine and to decide – and put forwards orders. One must simply know the rules of the game which the employees of course are expected to, living in (any kind of) an organization or as in this example a hierarcial structure.

Related to Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations (1953), it means, as Wittgenstein himself argues, that the meaning of words and the function of language cannot be abstractly determined, as they are always part of a social act or way of life, in which the meaning of words is explicitly related to the way of life in which they are used. That means i.e. if the management in a bureaucratic/hierarcial organization uses the word “communication” it is actually meant to mean something specific: in a bureaucratic or according to Scott (1992) a rational system the organizational structure framing the use of the word calls upon a specific kind of communication: a top down, linear communication. If the word “communication” is used in another context, i.e. in a natural system according to Scott, it means something quite different and invites to dialogue. But according to Wittgenstein, words and language are not merely related to context.

A certain set of rules related to a situation exists which the participant must know both to be able to take part in the interaction and to understand the meaning. Being able to identify the meaning of words you must according to Wittgenstein find out how words are used in different lifestyles or forms of life, which implies that there are just as many meanings as there are forms of life. The mere fact in the late Wittgenstein's works that language is not only a description of the world, but is a part or is our lifeworld and that language contributes to constructing the lifeworld calls upon a discussion on meaning in context, as it could be interesting to elaborate on what is understood by context. Is it a context constructed in language, which means that language derives meaning from language etc. – a never ending circle or an analytic truth and probably a never answered or answerable question. A philosophical problem I will not elaborate further on in this article – but actually both interesting and rather pivotal as goes for the understanding of Wittgenstein's philosophy and pragmatics as a whole.

Wittgenstein may probably contribute to make clear on one hand how organizational language is used in organizations and on the other hand to find out what role language plays and contributes to in constructing the social reality in the organization – and of course how the organizational sociality contributes to the organizational language. Lifeworld has been mentioned a few times above, which means that I related to this article will shortly unfold the subject. The concept of lifeworld is pivotal in the social construction of reality as both the sender's intention with a message and the receiver's interpretation depend on a great number of factors that provide the background for our interpretation. Any interpretation of the world is based on previous experiences, which again function as reference for the experiences we have in our everyday lives. Besides the common lifeworld there is the individual – or the individualized – lifeworld, where the concept of 'common' is a potential problem in the process of interpretation. Because the question is the extent to which something must be common or shared before it is meaningful to speak about collective interpretation, which has been essential to strategic management.

### ***3. Strategic Management and Language***

Strategic management poses the questions: Who are we? What do we do? Where do we want to go? How do we get from the present to the future? Nevertheless the goals a company strive to obtain, these goals can be made more obvious to the people (employees) who are expected to contribute to the fulfilment. That is one of the reasons why strategic management is inextricably linked with strategic management communication in which the aims and goals of the management should be made understandable to the people who shall contribute to this process. Therefore it is why it should be assumed that strategy must be communicated to achieve effect. That involves that management must be considered a constructivistic discipline in which the linguistic constructions construct reality.

The above mentioned aspects put a certain focus on language as social construction, as it is not only about the construction per se, but the focus is just as much on how it is constructed and how the construction takes place. Behind that lies a presumption that social constructions don't arise in a vacuum, but are the results (or consequences) of different social practices through time and space. Social practices are simply social systems and social systems consist of the relations between different agents reproduced through time and space. As so social systems are social practices which are reproduced and form a pattern of social relations. Another interesting point is how a possible relation between a company as construction and language has been brought forward, and how the company can be defined or has been constructed. For instance, it could have been through the formal structure of the company, or it could be in the understanding and sensemaking of the employees. It is of course in this context natural to ask, who constructs a company? And according to Astley & Zamutto managers have to make this construction

The role of management, consequently, becomes one of using words and ideas to shape conception of organizational reality. Leadership becomes, in effect, a language game. (Organization, Science, Managers, and Language Games". (Organization Science, november 1992). But it is probably neither a matter of chance or regularities that define how social processes are executed. Language (and communication) are in a phenomenological perspective situated in time and space and are therefore executed in context. That of course brings up the question, how the construction takes place, which implies that both agents and social systems have both intentions and interests contributing to define, how social practices develop through time and space. Furthermore, the above mentioned calls upon the necessity to take a position whether language is identical or the same to all stakeholders about a company, i.e. management, employees etc., or whether it maybe is in different languages linked to various roles different agents derive their identity, legitimacy and power. For instance, it could be assumed that what really differs between the management and the employees is that they so to speak construct different realities in language.

If this is correct, language could be seen as a power relation, where the balance between the two groups could be an attempt to maintain the existing order in a company, where on the contrary an attempt to establish a common language could be interpreted as an attempt to change the existing power or order. This is not only a question of power balance, but it also questions the aims of common language and collective sensemaking and interpretation in a company as i.e. a way to make the company both more effective and efficient. According to both Astley & Zamutto's and Roos & Krogh's demands that it is important that business leaders see their role as "meaning makers". They must pick and choose from the rough materials of reality to construct pictures of great possibilities. An effective leader's persuasion is of the subtlest kind, for he or she must interpret reality to offer images of the future that are irresistably meaningful. In the choice of words, values, and brief chosen, you as a leader "craft" reality to ensure commitment and confidence in the mission [ ] and that [m]anagement needs to develop systematic processes that stimulate languaging throughout the company, so that, over time, an internal lexicon is formed that can provide the foundation for an effective corporate identity it has occurred through empirical studies (Helder, 2006) that the theoretical positions within the field of strategic management claiming One company, one language related to the role of managers can be questioned.

One of the probably most interesting options related to the above mentioned claims to managers and their role as shapers of reality is that it may actually be dangerous to the organization in a way that it could threaten its existence if the employees made the managers' language their own. The managers' construction of reality therefore maybe should only function as a kind of linguistic scenography on economic statements that can function as the (necessary) background for work in the organizational lines (Helder, 2006). Related to a specific case it turned out that the certain company had succeeded economically despite the fact that the managers had only succeeded in communicating the(ir) strategy as a ritual game in the organization. Management – so to speak - had the floor, but the organization did not listen, did not understand or had probably made its own constructions of reality, and despite this contradiction the employees had fulfilled the jobs they were hired to execute – successfully! In this situation and despite the contradictions a common construction rose among the employees through dialogue and cooperation. Adding all together the result of the company was positive measured on an economical scale and on a scale of growth.

That might possibly call for a hypotheses that even if the employees are fighting, there does exist an inter-human understanding that could function as a point of departure working with and researching differentiated linguistic elements in companies. That perspective might contribute with new knowledge that might put forward adequate demands to strategic management communication and maybe stimulate new or revised hypothesis within the field of management communication. Common sensemaking or common interpretation about strategic goals in the specific company are definitely not a result of a construction or reality as described in the literature, as the company according to thesis in literature is in no way doing the right things. It can be stated that the management in no way perform communicative as it in the sense of Astley & Zamutto doesn't construct pictures of great possibilities, interpret reality to offer images of the future that are irresistably meaningful or shape conceptions of organizational reality. In the actual company several realities are constructed, which may lead to the following concluding remarks.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks**

It can be assumed that there might be reasons to question the theoretical positions within the field of strategic management research that call for and claim One Company, One Language, as the results from the above mentioned studies indicate multi-linguality. So it might be concluded that this article could contribute as an argument in the forthrunning discussion on strategic management – an argument that may stimulate work with new or revised hypotheses in the field of strategic management communication. This could further lead to the hypothesis that even if people fight, there is an inter-human understanding that could function as the starting point for working with different linguistic elements in different companies dealing with strategic management.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the references are in Danish as the thesis which is the basis of this article was written in Danish

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